

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: MILI, PARM, NATO, UK

SUBJECT: DEFENSE AS AN ELECTION ISSUE

REF: LONDON 12051

1. BRITISH DEFENSE POLICY AND SPENDING LEVELS -- WHICH HAVE NOT FIGURED PROMINENTLY IN RECENT ELECTIONS -- MAY BECOME ISSUES DURING THE GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN. PATRICK WALKER, TORY SHADOW SPOKESMAN ON DEFENSE, HAS ACCUSED THE GOVERNMENT OF CREATING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF BRITAIN'S DEFENSE FORCES FOR PARTISAN POLITICAL PURPOSES.

2. IN A 17 SEPTEMBER STATEMENT, MR. WALKER SAID LABOR HAS DELAYED ANNOUNCING THE RESULTS OF ITS DEFENSE REVIEW BECAUSE IT FEARS THE LOSS OF THE SERVICE VOTE AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF MARGINAL SEATS IN AREAS WITH HIGH DEFENSE-RELATED EMPLOYMENT THAT WOULD BE AFFECTED. ROYAL DOCKYARDS AT ROCHESTER, CHATHAM, PORTSMOUTH AND DEVONPORT COULD

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BE INVOLVED IN CUTS, HE SAID, AS MIGHT AIRCRAFT

FACTORIES IN PRESTON, BRISTON AND STEVENAGE. ALL HAVE MARGINAL CONSTITUENCIES.

3. MR. WALKER ALSO POINTED TO UNDERMINED MORALE IN THE ARMED FORCES AND POTENTIAL LOSSES IN IMPORTANT EXPORT SALES IF BRITAIN'S EQUIPMENT PROCUREMENT PROGRAMS ARE TO BE CUT. HE SUGGESTED STRONGLY THAT THE TORIES WILL TRY TO MAKE THE MAINTENANCE OF BRITAIN'S DEFENSE STRENGTH A MAJOR CAMPAIGN ISSUE, HOPING TO WIN MARGINAL SEATS FROM LABOR IN AREAS WHERE DEFENSE-RELATED EMPLOYMENT IS HIGH AND FEARS OF POSSIBLE UNEMPLOYMENT DEEPLY FELT. BOTH PARTIES RECOGNIZE FULLY THE DIVISIVE POTENTIAL OF THE DEFENSE ISSUE FOR THE LABOR PARTY (WHOSE LEFT WING HAS PRESSED FOR A 30 PERCENT SLASH IN DEFENSE EXPENDITURES AND THE REMOVAL OF NUCLEAR BASES FROM BRITAIN). LABOR CAN BE EXPECTED TO AVOID THE ISSUE WHEREVER POSSIBLE, EMPHASIZING THE CARE AND MODERATION THAT CHARACTERIZE THE DEFENSE REVIEW AND CAMPAIGN PLEDGES TO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT FOR THOSE WHOSE JOBS MAY BE AFFECTED BY EVENTUAL CUTS.

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